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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0091
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0184
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0663
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0121
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 1199
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0037
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENTIANE 000655

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, PRM

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SUBJECT: LAO REFUSE JOINT DEMARCHE, LIKE-MINDED GROUP LOOKS
TO UP THE ANTE

REF: VIENTIANE 542

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The Lao Foreign Minister has refused to receive a joint demarche on the missing children, the GoL saying the President's June 22 letter to the UN Secretary General provided the government's final word on the matter. The UN's Department of Political Affairs (DPA) was not pleased with that response, and is looking to follow up, likely with a high-level visit to Vientiane and possibly with a follow-on letter from the SG. The like-minded group has interpreted the FM's refusal as an affront and is visiting a number of ideas to push the GoL on the missing children, starting with individual calls by members of the group on MFA Director-Generals to stress that the issue is costing Lao serious political capital. In the meantime, there is little new information about the children, leaving us more concerned than ever about their condition. End comment.

GoL refuses joint demarche

2. (C) The like-minded group met July 12 at the residence of the Australian Ambassador to discuss next steps on the missing children. The Ambassadors of France, Australia and the U.S., Charges or mission personnel from the Swedish, German, Polish, and EU missions, and the UN Acting ResRep attended. In addition, UNHCR's Deputy Regional Representative traveled from Bangkok to join the meeting. UNDP, which has been the lead agency on the joint demarche, began by briefing on the MFA's refusal to receive the demarche. MFA's International Organizations Department told UNDP July 10 that the newly-seated FM believed the GoL had already made its position on the missing children clear, and that in any event he would be unavailable to meet until the end of July. The IO Department noted the Lao government had addressed the issue on many occasions, most recently in the President's June 22 response to the UNSG's letter. The government felt it had nothing further to say on the matter. MFA also emphasized that any future discussions of the issue should be made at

the MFA's DG level.

13. (C) The UNDP representative said that the President's letter had not gone down well with the DPA in UN New York. It was interpreted as arrogant in tone and dissimulating in its characterization of the events revolving around the children's disappearance. The DPA did not intend to let the matter rest, but planned to send a high-level official from the office to Laos as soon as practicable, probably in mid-August. The DPA was also considering whether the SG, who was personally following the issue, would follow up with a second letter to the Lao President. The DPA had also urged the Vientiane UNDP office to submit the contents of the joint demarche to the Foreign Minister via diplomatic note or letter.

14. (C) The group generally interpreted the GoL's refusal to accept the demarche as a serious miscalculation, and a galling protocol breach. Several of those attending offered their ideas on why the Lao had chose to "dig themselves deeper," in the words of the German Charge; most believed the Lao simply thought they could put their foot down and make the matter go away, in their usual style. Others believed the Lao could not release the children because they were either dead or badly mistreated. In any event, the GoL's strategy had quite the opposite effect, and all the participants agreed that they needed to press ahead. The question was not whether to follow up, but how.

Next steps

15. (C) The group put forward a number of suggestions on how

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to leverage the GoL, including:

-- Attempting to organize a meeting between the Lao President or PM (one of whom would presumably be attending the September UNGA in New York), his Thai counterpart and the SG;

-- Encourage the visit soonest of a senior representative from the DPA, and encourage as well a follow-up letter from the SG;

-- Seek ministerial level pressure, using for example the upcoming ASEAN Post Ministerial Meeting in KL to raise the issue directly with the Lao FM. This could include having the respective Foreign Ministers write the Lao FM to express concern about the children;

-- Seek to engage the Japanese and ASEAN countries to raise the issue with the Lao at appropriate opportunities;

-- Send the demarche points, signed by all the intended participants, to the Lao under cover of diplomatic letter;

-- Appeal to the Lao government's "compassion" in some public forum.

16. (C) In view of the government's refusal to receive the demarche, the group agreed that "upsetting" the Lao was no longer a concern. There was an abundance of evidence that the children were in Laos and under GoL control. This fact needed to be communicated to the Lao in some fashion to demonstrate that the community did not accept their protestations about not knowing where the children were -- the Lao need to "know that we know that they know," as the Australian Ambassador phrased it. This could include informing the Lao by some means that there was "proof" the government had the children, in the form of the Bolikhamsai province police report on the interrogation of the 22 females. It was also important for the Lao to understand that this issue was costing them political goodwill. The longer the children remained "disappeared" in the GoL system, the more outcry and condemnation there would be from the international community.

17. (C) Still, care needed to be taken not to challenge the Lao so directly that they might retaliate against the children. With that end in mind, the group concluded that the proposal to submit the demarche points to the Foreign Minister was likely to be provocative and therefore counter-productive. A better plan, they felt, was to raise the missing children on a one-on-one basis with the appropriate DG's in MFA, essentially to remind MFA that the international community was not accepting the GoL explanation of the event and would continue to press on the issue. It was agreed that each participant would seek a meeting with its appropriate MFA DG to convey the continued interest in the children. The French Ambassador would use his personal relationship with the MFA Press Spokesman (who seems to have a direct line to the Politburo on this issue) to make the same points. The group would meet again after these series of meetings to take stock.

Comment

18. (C) If it was intended to nip the issue in the bud, the Lao refusal to receive the demarche on the children could not have been more badly calculated. The GoL's arrogance, not only on the demarche but also in the tone of the President's letter to the SG, has goaded even the most passive members of our like-minded group. Gone is the excuse-making for the Lao. The group has unanimously come around to believing that the Lao should no longer be coddled, and the government be put on notice that the international community does not believe its version of events.

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19. (C) Behind our efforts, however, is the fear that the Lao won't release them because they can't -- some of the children may be dead, or at least badly treated. It is also worrying that almost all news about the children has dried up. Sources (including family members in Thailand) who several months ago could relate limited information now report they are hearing nothing, and have no idea about the children's location or condition. The government seems to believe that it can simply write them off, and the international community will drop the matter. It also believes it can absolve itself of responsibility for their fate. In fact, this denial of responsibility was a repeated theme in the President's letter to the SG. But the sense of outrage about the children is growing, and this issue is going to continue to haunt the GoL. End comment.
HASLACH